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Gideon Bachmann; Antonioni

Film Quarterly, Vol. 28, No. 4, Special Book Issue. (Summer, 1975), pp. 26-30.

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Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

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Antonioni After China: Art Versus Science

There is a difference between seeing and proving, and it is this difference which divides art from science. To the artistic observer, the scientist who seeks proof seems a pitiable wretch, and conversely, the use of mere perception as the source of knowledge seems highly suspicious to some scientists.

—KONRAD LORENZ

"I want the Chinese to know this: during the war, as a member of the Resistance, I was condemned to death!"

Antonioni's need to make this statement, polemically and publicly, in discussing the Chinese attempts to sabotage, the world over, the screening of the documentary he shot in China, indicates the bitterness in the man. A bitterness, undoubtedly, which cannot but reflect on his works which follow. In fact, Maria Schneider, who plays in it, told me that *The Passenger*, his latest film, seemed to her, during its production, his most desperate. A film, she says, without any form of optimism. He had gone to China full of optimism.

There he produced 220 minutes of calm, poetic footage. A documentary that gives no facile answers, provides no scientific analysis. A work of perception that calls upon your sensibilities, even your endurances. Certainly not one of those which to its claim of objectivity adds a dose of attitude. (That, in fact, is evidently what the Chinese resent most.)

Even if Antonioni's "other side" is less easily defined today than it was in 1943, when even anti-fascism seemed a simpler concept, with enemies more readily identified, it is certainly not Antonioni who has changed barricades. It is precisely the lack of the simplistic, "scientific"

attitude requested by the Chinese, precisely that openness and lack of bias, which for the thinking viewer represents the film's greatest value. *Chung-Kuo* is a film made with love, not with opinion.

In *The Passenger* (originally entitled *Profession: Reporter*) Jack Nicholson plays a man given the chance to change identity midway in life. Based on an idea by Mark Peploe, it shows what disasters follow this attempt at self-liberation. It is basically a film about the uselessness of human individuality and of the strife for quality in one's expressions. It is the first time that Antonioni has filmed the idea of another, but after initial perplexity he found in the story elements which intrigued him in terms of his own experience. He denies that it is an autobiographical study. But the spirit of the work is the spirit of Antonioni.

BACHMANN: *Your films are similar inasmuch as they have always shown the world to be in decline, but you have always seemed to say that we must live in it, as best we can, anyway. This seems the first time you depict the attempt at escape. Are you less confident now?*

ANTONIONI: I have only tried to be more objective, even if this word seems ambiguous. A journalist sees reality with a certain consistency, the ambiguous consistency of his viewpoint, which to him, and only to him, seems objective. Jack in the film sees things in his way and I, as the director, play the role of the journalist behind the journalist: I again add other dimensions to reproduced reality.

So "objectivity" isn't something you seek . . .

No, the dialectic of life would be missing. Films would become boring. Pretending to be

objective, you annul yourself. Others talk through you but you remain extraneous. What sense would life have, then? When I say that I have tried to be more objective, I mean it in a technical way. I no longer want to employ the subjective camera, in other words the camera that represents the viewpoint of the character. The objective camera is the camera wielded by the author. Using it I make my presence felt. The camera's viewpoint becomes mine.

Did going to China, where you were forced to use the camera as an observer, prepare you for this?

Certainly; this is one of the reasons why the China project was so interesting for me. I had to shoot very quickly: 80 shots a day, my absolute record. We had five weeks and an enormous itinerary. I could not do what I had done in the period of my early documentaries, where I studied the light for every shot, and picked the best hours of the day for shooting. I couldn't prepare much. While my early documentaries prepared me for features, this Chinese experience has prepared me for the new way in which I have used the camera in *The Passenger*. I am not really a good son of neorealism; I'm rather the black sheep of its family, and with this film even more so. I have replaced my objectivity with that of the camera. I can direct it any way I want; as the director, I am God. I can allow myself any kind of liberty. Actually, the liberty I have achieved in the making of this film is the liberty the character in the film tried to achieve by changing identity.

So it is your own story in a way?

Only inasmuch as it is my story as an artist, as a director—without wanting to sound presumptuous. In my own life, I don't know whether I shall succumb. I don't mean to the temptation to change identity; we all have that. But to destiny, since each one of us carries his destiny within himself. I do not know whether I shall succumb to that, to all those acts which at the end of a life come together to make up one's destiny. Some succumb and some don't. Perhaps changing one's identity one commits an error, one succumbs to life, one dies, in essence. It depends on the acts one commits, having ap-

propriated to oneself that other identity. It's a presumptuousness that probably puts one in conflict with life itself.

Of all the species, only man seems overly concerned with his identity. We seem to have done, as a species, what you describe.

We have created a structure that produces doubts. We are all dissatisfied. The international situation, politically and otherwise, is so unstable, that the lack of stability is reflected within each individual. But I'm used to talking in pictures, not words. This conversation doesn't create images; I prefer to remain more concrete. When I talk of man, I want to see his face. In China, when I asked them what they felt was the most important thing in their revolution, they said it was the new man. That is what I tried to focus on. Each individual, each one creating his own little revolution, all those little revolutions which together will change humanity. That's why I insist upon a personal viewpoint, concretizing it with the camera; every change in history has always started from individuals. You can't change facts: it's the human mind that creates human action.

Aren't we losing this faith in the industrial age?

When this age began, it enlarged the definition of the individual. As it also enlarged the conflict between it and society, the social conflict, which obviously was born in an industrial context. Perhaps Marx today should be corrected a little. Not his drive to change society, but the ways of doing it. We are back to discussing identity. It is a question of the usefulness of individuality in a given social context. In an antheap identity was lost since it no longer served a practical purpose. It was replaced by the individuality of the group. In my work, too, the usefulness of art is changing, and its utility to society, but I think that the product we call art will continue to exist. The human being needs to express himself in some way, in community with others. That is the search for identity: the desperate need to participate in society.

Thus you create a personal cinema, a viewpoint cinema, in order to participate in society?

Films are seen by this mass of people, all to-

gether. Thus a minimum of contact, for those seeking it, is produced. It is important to find the common denominator, even if this can lead to misunderstandings. As in the case where the common denominator is the political ideal. But I don't think cinema will remain so complicated much longer; the future lies in videotape. People will use film cameras as they use still cameras today; they will express themselves. And when television comes to present—as it has barely begun doing in a few countries—a more stimulating product than the cinema, the cinema will lose out. But we are still very much behind. In Italy, for example, until we have color television, I will not work for TV. What I would really like to do is make a feature film with television cameras, that is my dream. That is what I had planned on doing with *Technically Sweet*, the film I had hoped to make before this one. It was to be based on a story by Calvino, the Italian poet who lives in Paris. Telecameras offer a very free working method. You can paint your images. You can change the colors. Since the colors are electronic, this is easy, as it is for a painter. I had tried to do this in the cinema, with *Red Desert*, but I want to carry this technique even further. What counts, is the reality that ends up on the screen. My reality.

So "objective" reality doesn't exist?

Certainly not. But it exists inasmuch as we exist.

What does this film represent, finally, in your career?

It's an important stage for me, mostly because it's not based on a story I wrote myself. When it was first suggested to me that I should direct a film based on this script of Mark Peploe's, I was somewhat taken aback, but then, rather instinctively, I decided for it, feeling that after all there was something in this story which reminded me of I-don't-know-what. I began to shoot, to work, before I even had a final script, because there wasn't much time, due to Jack Nicholson's other commitments. So I started working with a certain feeling of distance. A feeling of being somewhat removed from the story itself. For the first time I found I was working more with the brain than, let's say, with

the stomach. But during the shooting of the film's beginning, the certain something that this story contained began to interest me ever more. In this journalist, as in every journalist, there co-exists the drive to excel, to produce quality work, and the feeling that this quality is ephemeral. The feeling, thus, that his work is valid for a fleeting moment only.

In an age of rapid consumption, that is a feeling shared by all those working in art or in communication.

In fact no one can understand such a feeling better than a film director, since we are working with a material, the film stock, which is itself ephemeral, physically short-lived. Time consumes it. In my film, when Jack feels saturated to the gills with this sentiment, after years of work, a moment arrives when there is a break in his inner armor, when he feels the need for a personal revolution. Add to this frustrations for other motives: a failed marriage, an adopted son whose presence did not have the expected effect upon his life, and another, ethical need, which becomes stronger as he progresses. You will understand, then, how this character, in the moment when the occasion arises, takes the opportunity to change identity, fascinated by the promise of the liberty that he expects will follow. That, in any case, was my point of departure. What the film tells, is the story of what happens to him after this change of identity, the vicissitudes that he encounters, perhaps the disappointments.

So the film is in a way also the story of itself?

Only indirectly, because I have been able to apply a technique which resembles that of the journalist in the film. I shot the film with the same eye the journalist uses in his viewing of reality, using this "objective" kind of camera-work I described. Two or three "subjective" shots have remained in the film, but for the rest of it the camera was free to abandon the characters, to precede them where they were headed, to shoot that which was interesting for me, the reporter of my reporter, to watch, to fix, to record. I have thought a great deal about this, because in my previous films I had never quite felt this liberty.

How would you define the technical differences between this work and your preceding ones?

This way of looking at things has permitted me to return to the *piano-sequenza* [the "sequence-shot" or very long camera take, in which events change and grow within the frame, rather than using a short-take-based "montage" technique.—G.B.], which I had abandoned quite some time ago. But even that is not true for the whole film; actually every sequence in the film uses its own particular technique. I can't even say whether there is a coherent, uniform style for the whole; if there is, it is an *internal* style. I felt the need to present myself, afresh, in a free way, in confrontation with every new part of the film. In shooting, this system has allowed me a feeling of great joy.

You said China prepared you for this. There, too, you had gone with joy. But you seem to have carried those experiences to fruition more in The Passenger than in Chung-Kuo. Was that because you had more control?

My experiences in China must be divided into two clear and separate ones. The first one was that of the shooting, of visiting certain parts of China—unfortunately not many, but more was not allowed me. That experience, I must say, was of an absolutely positive nature. I found myself facing a people, a country, which showed clear signs of the revolution that had occurred. In seeking out the face of this new society I followed my natural tendency to concentrate on individuals, and to show the new man, rather than the political and social structures which the Chinese revolution created. Because in order to understand those structures, one would have to stay in a country much longer. These five weeks permitted only a quick glance; as a voyager I saw things with a voyager's eye. I tried to take the film spectator with me, to take him by the hand, as it were, and have him accompany me on this trip. Also, social and political structures are abstract entities which are not easily expressed in images. One would have to add words to those images, and that wasn't my role. I had not gone to China to understand it, but only to

see it. To look at it and to record what passed under my eyes.

Had it been your idea to go there?

No. This was not a documentary planned by me. The project was born of a relationship which Italian television (RAI) had initiated with the Chinese Embassy in Rome. I had not been informed beforehand. One day they called me and asked if I wanted to shoot a documentary in China. I responded enthusiastically, because the matter obviously interested me greatly.

You said your experiences in China must be divided into two parts . . .

When the film was finished, the first persons, outside of my collaborators, to whom it was shown, were some representatives of the Chinese Embassy in Rome. The ambassador didn't show up. There was the director of the New China Agency and two or three others. At the end of the screening these persons expressed themselves positively. "You," they said, "Signor Antonioni, have looked at our country with a very affectionate eye. And we thank you." That was the first reaction of certain Chinese responsible people. I don't know what happened after that. I have no idea why they changed their opinion. I can only imagine why, but it would be a useless subject for discussion.

From what I've read, it doesn't seem to me that the objections were on an artistic or filmic level at all.

I am accused of having associated myself with Lin Piao in denigrating the Chinese revolution. It has been said that I did not sufficiently appreciate what the socialist system and the dictatorship of the proletariat in China have constructed. I reject in the most decisive manner that this is true of my documentary. Seeing it you will realize this. It has been said that I am being paid by Russian revisionists. Who these Russian revisionists are supposed to be, I truly do not know; or rather I suppose that I do know, because, after all, I live on this planet and not on another, and thus what happens in other countries does interest me. It has been said that I purposely denigrated China in many other ways; one of these is supposed to be the fact that I have used a "cool" color tone in order to eliminate the

real colors of China and of the Chinese landscape. It has been said that I've denigrated Chinese children, I really don't know why. I made shots of those children while they were singing their little songs; their delicious little faces. They are really beautiful, Chinese children, and if I could, I would adopt one. I don't see how I could have denigrated them. I have been told that I showed the bridge in Nanking in a diminished way, not triumphal enough. I must say that in fact the day I went to shoot it it was a foggy day and I asked to be allowed to return another day. There is a long shot of the bridge left in the film, I think, but it doesn't show the bridge in a very expressive way. I had to limit myself to take shots of the bridge from closer by, and naturally, passing underneath it, the bridge appears slightly deformed. But that is our way of looking at things, from an individualistic viewpoint. That is the point of departure that our own social context creates. When certain aspects of reality fascinate me, my first instinct is to record them. We, as descendants of Western civilization, point our cameras at things that surround us, with a certain trust in the interpretative capacities of the viewer.

Is there anything that could fall under this definition that you were actually kept from shooting?

Well . . . I remember when we were in the center of China, in Hunan province, we came through a village where a free market was going on, a thing apparently widely tolerated in China. I asked to get off, but the driver wouldn't stop. I made something of a fuss; I said to the driver, look, let me off, and I opened the door of the car, and he stopped. But the people who were there to accompany me—and in this case they were eight—didn't tell me "don't shoot." They just said, "You may shoot, if you wish, but it displeases us." You will see this scene in the film. What would another Italian director have done in my stead? Obviously I started shooting; then I saw that their displeasure was indeed great, and I stopped. What I want to say is that everything I did in China was done in complete accord with the people who were there to accompany me. Usually there were eight of them.

In Nanking there were fourteen. Thus I never did anything that wasn't allowed and I never shot anything without their being present. I don't see what they are accusing me of now. It is really unheard of. May I add that the vulgar language of their accusations really hurts me. And that is what I mean by my second experience of China; not the experience in China itself, which was positive. The negative experience concerning China is this one, this lurking about in the undergrowth of politics. Their going to the Foreign Ministry to try and stop the projection here. Their going to Sweden, as they did, to try to blackmail the Swedish government by threatening to cease having cultural relations with Sweden if Swedish TV presented the film. Their going to Greece—mind you, while the colonels were still in power—and asking the colonels not to show the film, which happened. Their going to Germany to try and do the same thing; the Germans, unlike the Greeks, refused. Their going to France to try and do the same thing again. It is this method they use which seems so small-minded to me. This way they have of insulting me personally, calling me a charlatan, a *buffone*—that is the word, I can't tell you the Chinese original, I only read the papers in Italian. I have been accused of being a fascist! Of having fought with the fascist troops! I want the Chinese to know this: during the war, as a member of the Resistance, I was condemned to death. I was on the other side! I must say these things, once and for all, because it can't go on that these people go around insulting me in this way and I can't even find anyone to defend me, because . . . because, after all, we do like the Chinese people, and I like them too. What I don't like is those who insult me without even knowing who I am, this business of allowing people like those fools of "Italia-China" [a Maoist Italian youth organization.—G. B.] to say whatever idiot things they want to. I have nothing else to say.